Greenhouse

THE COLUMBIA GREENHOUSE NURSERY SCHOOL AND KINDERGARTEN

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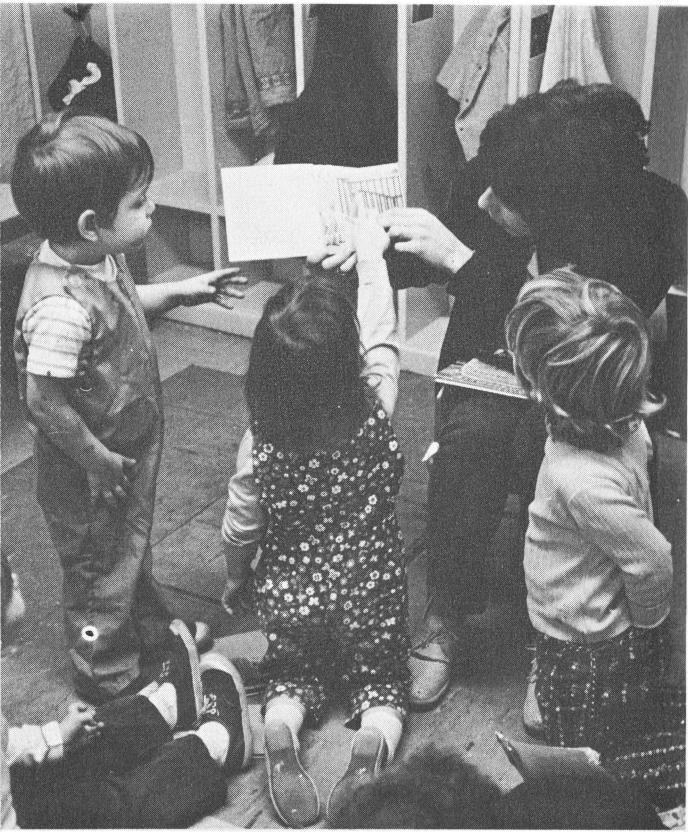

Photograph by Joseph Rubin

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The Columbia Greenhouse Nursery School and Kindergarten, known as the Greenhouse, is one of America's oldest private nursery schools. Adjacent to the Columbia University campus, it is located on 116th Street between Morningside Drive and Amsterdam Avenue. It offers a program for children three through five years of age which is neither experimental nor committed solely to one method of instruction, but is based on sound principles of child development and educational practice.

The Greenhouse is independent and nonsectarian. It reflects the diversity of the university community and of the neighborhood, and is open to all who wish to apply. Children from many parts of the United States and from countries across the world enter each year. All are welcome.

Since many of the parents are university students, junior staff, and young professors, the tuition is kept as low as is possible without hampering the quality of education. The Greenhouse is among the least expensive schools of its kind in New York. It has traditionally received an annual contribution and support from Columbia University and gives priority to the children of its faculty, staff, and students.

The school is parent-administered, and is therefore a cooperative enterprise. The actual instruction and operation, however, are in the hands of the director and teaching staff.

Aims and Methods

The aim of the school is to provide an environment which helps each child to learn with pleasure. This means that the Greenhouse furthers the child's desire to explore his own capacities and ideas, other people's thoughts and behavior, and the material world. Through interaction with a stimulating and accepting environment, the child's natural curiosity is encouraged and extended in his daily experiences. The teacher's role is to be sensitive to each child's needs and qualities and to facilitate his urge to learn and master that which is challenging to him.

A caring staff and homelike quarters provide warm and intimate surroundings which enhance feelings of security and allow for an easy transition from home to school.

The school provides the children with a wide variety of carefully chosen materials and equipment—for example, dress-up clothes, dolls, tea sets, puzzles, books, live animals, paint, musical instruments, Tinkertoys, building blocks, tricycles, woodworking tools, clay, sand and water. Skilled teachers guide the children in their use of these resources to help them learn about their world from many angles. One question, interest, or skill leads to the next. The curriculum evolves day by day, building upon the child's practice of newly-won skills and elaboration of old ones, and is moved forward by his curiosity and needs.

The fact that the same children and adults are regularly present leads to learning in depth about oneself and others and tends to promote strong involvement. Emotional, social, physical, and intellectual life are thoroughly intertwined in early education,

just as they are in the child. Rather than focusing exclusively on any one area of development, teachers focus on encouraging growth of the child himself in whatever ways he seems to need to grow.

Within the context of group living, children's self-direction and resourcefulness are fostered, and different learning styles and pacing are respected. Attempts are made to bring out each unique personality, not to fit each into a mold. Individuality is the keynote to the products which the children so proudly carry home. The innumerable paintings, wood sculptures, and sundry other objects may often be enjoyed for themselves but are valued even more as evidence of the processes of learning.

There are group activities that teach the values and requirements of a common endeavor—singing, planting seeds, taking trips to interesting places in the city, making candles or popcorn, and listening and responding to a story about a daring green

inchworm. The children also help to clean up at the end of each session so that they begin to take responsibility for maintaining order.

The basic materials used by the children—blocks, clay, water, etc.—remain the same throughout the three-year program but the older children use them in increasingly sustained and complex ways. By the kindergarten year a child may be making a dinosaur panorama, charting a comparison of shoe sizes, creating original pop-up books, or holding an audience spellbound during a puppet show. Learning about the natural world and its laws through activities like cooking, woodworking, blockbuilding, and water play ties in with learning the rudiments of arithmetic, writing, and reading in an action-oriented setting suitable for children of this age. One must have experiences, know what words mean, and organize thoughts before the written symbol takes on significance.

Day by day the children, materials, and teachers interact to give each child an increasing sense of being able to cope with,

master, and even transform his surroundings. He acquires attitudes, habits, and techniques, and piles up experiences that prepare him for the more formal learning in primary school. He comes to tackle new ideas and encounters with confidence, thoroughness, imagination, and flair. He learns to handle social relationships with greater ease, developing the sensibility and communication skills needed in varied interaction.

"Play is the child's way of learning." So said Columbia's John Dewey, and so the teachers at the Greenhouse believe. Play is an exploration, an experiment, an adventure that fosters involvement, concentration, and imagination.

Numerous parents and visitors to the Greenhouse comment upon the relaxed but busy atmosphere of the school—its friendliness and informality, and they note the children's joy and absorption in their projects.

Program

The daily program provides for alternate periods of quiet and active play, and allows the children choice of activity within general limits. During each session a light snack is served—often a delicacy prepared by the children themselves.

Supervised outdoor play is an integral part of each day, in almost all weathers. The backyard used frequently by the "threes" and "fours" is just outside their classrooms. They and the "fives" regularly use the larger playground in the adjoining sand-covered lot. There is a rich assortment of play equipment, properly scaled to the child's size and physical needs, which is safe and inviting to the wary, yet challenging to the boldest child.

Classes range in size from thirteen in the

youngest to twenty-two in the oldest. Each is taught by a qualified, experienced teacher and a full-time assistant teacher. In addition, part-time teachers-in-training and occasional researchers participate. In effect, therefore, the Greenhouse may have as many as three teachers for each of its small classes, affording the children an exceptional amount of individual attention.

Because a gradual adjustment to school is usually a firmer one, small groups attend shortened sessions at the beginning of the year with someone from home present as needed. As the children and teachers become more familiar and comfortable with each other, the group becomes ready for participation on a regular schedule.

Details of groupings, hours and tuition are available on a separate sheet.

Administration

In addition to having a qualified director, experienced in early childhood education, the school is administered by a Parents Association. Composed of all the parents of children concurrently enrolled at the Greenhouse, the Association is responsible for finances and general policy making. A few business meetings are held during the year and at least one parent of each child is expected to attend. An elected Executive Board meets to oversee the work of the Association's committees and to study matters facing the school. Board members and the director work closely in implementing decisions.

Each parent is expected to participate in the work of the Association through its various committees and projects. Parents also frequently contribute their special talents to the classes—perhaps teaching a folk dance or

playing the violin or demonstrating an art technique.

Maintaining the Greenhouse as a cooperative enables the parents of each child to know the school well, to encourage a program of high quality while keeping the tuition fee low. Parents and teachers are in close touch concerning the children's progress, and parents are invited to observe the class in action at any time.

On a regular basis, a parents' committee prints the Greenhouse newsletter. Families are thereby informed of meetings and events, changes in program and personnel, problems confronting the school, and what the classes have been doing. Other topics of interest to parents may be included, such as recommended children's books and children's services and programs in New York City.

Eligibility and Admission

The school is open to all who wish to apply, for children three through five years of age, and strives for a diverse mixture of children from varied backgrounds. An attempt is made to enroll an equal number of boys and girls in each group.

Priority is given to the children of those who work or study at Columbia University, who comprise the larger part but not the whole of the Greenhouse student body. University-affiliated families are given preferential tuition rates.

The Greenhouse does not provide bus service but private transportation may be arranged by parents, and carpools (or walking pools) are frequent. In making transportation arrangements, parents should keep in mind that the informal and fairly regular contact between parents and children and teachers at arrival and departure times is an important and useful part of the school experience.

Limited scholarship funds are available for partial tuition reduction. The Parents Association raises these funds through its projects each year and welcomes contributions in order that the school may more fully serve the community.

Details of application procedure and financial arrangements may be found on a separate flyer.

For further information, write or telephone to:

Columbia Greenhouse Nursery School
and Kindergarten
424 West 116th Street
New York, New York 10027
Telephone: (212) 666-4796

History

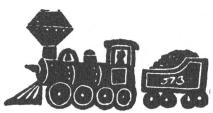
The Greenhouse evolved from a play group for the children of young Columbia faculty members and was established by Mrs. Henry Crampton, herself a professor's wife. That was in 1919—the same year one of the first nursery schools in America was founded at Columbia's Teachers College. Meeting at first on campus corners, in empty classrooms, and on rooftops, in 1922 the play group was offered quarters in a botanical greenhouse belonging to the university at 116th Street and Amsterdam Avenue. A teacher was hired, a more organized program was instituted, and a name—Greenhouse—was acquired for the new nursery school.

For nearly three decades Mrs. Crampton ran the small school while an affectionate teacher, Rose McGuffey, directed the play groups. Initially intended as a reliable and cheerful baby-sitting operation, the Greenhouse program gradually became more educationally oriented.

When Mrs. Crampton retired in 1950, the parents of the school's children took over

Photograph by Larry Mulvehill

responsibility for its continuation. New teachers were hired. One of them, Carrie Cheek, went on to become director and remained with the school until 1970.

The program was professionally assessed by experts from Bank Street College of Education in the mid-fifties, and revamped according to the latest research and approaches. In 1954 a $3,000 grant from the Heckscher Foundation was obtained for new equipment and supplies. The Greenhouse moved into its present home in a brick townhouse at 424 West 116th Street in 1958.

In 1964, in order to provide a complete program for young children, the parents and director established a kindergarten. Located in a large, sunny, ground-floor apartment at 404 West 116th Street, it adjoins the Greenhouse's outdoor playground.